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Consumer Boycotts in Switzerland 1994-2004:

Typologies and Strategies

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Abstract

This paper suggests that consumer boycotts target irresponsible behaviors of corporations toward consumer, political, and social issues. After identifying the characteristics of consumer boycotts' best practices, the paper documents the results of a field study conducted on consumer boycotts in Switzerland. Results reveal its peculiarities compared to the reality in the United States, where empirical works in this field are mainly conducted. Moreover, the paper provides evidence of consumer boycotts' weaknesses and strengths in Switzerland and emphasizes the principles that should be considered by boycotters to reach the consumer boycott best practices.

1. Introduction

Boycott is defined as the tentative of one or more actors to obtain the achievement of their objectives leveraging on consumers abstention to buy products on the market (Friedman 1999). Consumer boycotts differ from other types of boycotts, such as embargos, since they have not only an economical purpose, but also a social one (Descheneaux 1980). In the past, consumer boycotts were underestimated by companies; such is no longer the case (Friedman 1999, Drillech 1999). Indeed, nowadays companies understand that boycotts are an increasing phenomenon since consumers are more and more conscious about companies' non-social behaviors. Many studies predict that this phenomenon will continue to increase (Geld 1995, Drillech 1999, Friedman 1999) as activists have developed great expertise in organizing boycotts, resulting in modifications to corporations' and mass media's agendas. Moreover, consumers seem to be more sensitive with regard to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Brown and Dacin 1997, Walker Research 1994). Finally, organizations have initiated a dialogue with boycotters in order to integrate into their business important expectations (Davidson 1995, Davidson et al. 1995) that have the potential stain their reputations (Drillech 1999).

The increasing importance of consumer boycotts is primarily a trend in the United States, with the development still limited in Europe. This fact explains why the empirical work done in this field reflects mostly the North American reality (Drillech 1999). To fill this gap, this paper explores consumer boycotts in Switzerland from 1994 to 2004, a country where previous studies on boycotts have not taken place. The main objective of this study is to identify the peculiarities of boycotts in Switzerland as well as their weaknesses and strengths. To initiate the research, a list of consumer boycotters active in Switzerland was developed, in compliance with the common methodology used in such studies (Friedman 1999; Fink 1995), which combines desk research with snowball sampling. Literature was reviewed to define the dimensions for analyzing consumer boycotts as well as to understand the principles behind their strategies. This analytical work led to the design of a questionnaire as well as the identification of characteristics of consumer boycott best practices.

2. Dimensions to investigate: Practices and strategies of consumer boycotts

The literature review identified three main dimensions of consumer boycotts' typologies and best practices.

2.1. Consumer boycotts' typologies and typical corporate issues/targets:

The literature refers to two different ways to define typologies of boycotts. The first differentiates three types of boycotts based on the dynamics used to reach the target (Friedman 1999, Drillech 1999). In direct boycotts the real target is addressed, whereas in surrogate

boycotts, consumers decide to boycott an organization because it belongs to a nation or a particular industry whose behavior they disapprove of. Finally, secondary boycotts address an economical partner of the real target, such as its provider. These boycotts are similar to the surrogate boycotts to the extent that they try to hit the target through a third party.

The second way to define typologies of boycotts differentiates four types of boycotts based on their functions (Friedman 1999, Smith 2000). Instrumental boycotts aim to change the focal organization's behavior, such as lowering a product's price or forcing the organization to close a corporate branch. In this case, the boycotts represent a tool for negotiating in a dialogue with the organization (Friedman 1999). Instrumental boycotts may be long and may be initiated by promoters that benefit from the boycott (Friedman 1999).

Expressive boycotts aim to express a general disappointment on an issue. Typically, in this category boycotts encompass a widespread list of products. Such boycotts might be announced, but not organized. In this case, negotiation is not initiated since the goal is to create public pressure on the media (Smith 2000). Expressive boycotts are also called conscience boycotts since they do not necessarily have promoters that benefit directly from them.

Meanwhile, punitive boycotts aim to cause temporary profit loss since the irresponsible action of an organization can not be fixed. In this case, a dialogue is almost never established (Friedman 1999). Finally, so-called "boycotts" aim to support a particular organization for their model behavior. Being on boycotters' white list equates to a good dialogue opportunity (Michel 1934; Smith 2000).

Each of these typologies of boycotts may refer to different issues. An *issue* is defined as "the gap between the corporate practice and the stakeholders' expectations" (Regester and Larking 1997, p. #). Economical/consumer issues may depend on the price or quality of a product and typically are associated with instrumental and punitive boycotts, whereas social and political issues may be linked to all typologies of boycotts. Scholars (Friedman 1985, 1999) and professionals (i.e., Business for Social Responsibility [www. bsr.org]¹) distinguish several types of political and social issues, including environmental issues, workplace environment issues, human rights issues, public health issues, animal issues, war issues, social development issues, and ethics issues.

2.2 Consumer boycott strategies

Boycotters' strategies aim to reach two aspects: the pressure they can create on the focal organization and the predisposition of an organization to change its behavior (Garrett 1987). An overview of the debate on consumer boycotts results in identifying three strategies used by promotional groups either together or singularly. A fourth strategy, the World Wide Web (Illia

2003), is not included so as to limit the research to traditional strategies in an effort to compare it to previous work performed by Friedman (1999) for the United States.

One consumer boycott strategy is to choose the target product or brand in light of the degree of visibility of the target organization (Drillech 1999) both in terms of international/public landscape and its reputation (Friedman 1999). The better the reputation of the organization, the more likely it will be open to negotiation in order to maintain this reputation.

A second strategy is to organize a deep and broad network around the boycott (Gesualdi 1999). In this case, the behavior of people is influenced by one from their peer group (Arnett et al. 2003). As Sen et al. (2001) agree, this mechanism is relevant for boycotts since people are more prone to adhere to a boycott when their peers do. This strategy bases its potentialities on multiple alliance forces (Drillech 1999, Morelli and Raitano 2004, Gesualdi 1999) and the identification mechanisms of supporters with their peer groups according to consumer psychology theory.

Another strategy is to orient the boycott either to the media or to the market (Friedman 1999). Boycotters may decide to address the public opinion focusing on the image of the target corporation through media orientation or drive the boycott on sales points, giving flyers or picketing the organization. Typically, the latter has more impact on small or medium sized organizations. It is possible to conclude that such strategies may depend also on the lifecycle of the issue that boycotters defend. As Hainsworth and Meng (1998) assert, when an issue is in its potential or early emerging phase, little or no awareness of it exists among the public. In light of this principle and the above considerations about the abstention to buy, it is possible to conclude that, when the issue is in its early stage, it is better to have a media orientation.

It is important to emphasize that all strategies enounced have to be supported by good planning that includes a clear definition of the objective, both in terms of results and time, as well as a clear definition of resources available (Gesualdi 1999, Murtagh et al. 1994).

2.3 Consumer boycott communicational strategies

Boycotters should consider three factors in their communication strategies (Drillech 1999): consumers, the target organization, and mass media.

In the communication strategy with consumers, boycotters should consider mainly two typologies of potential supporters: occasional supporters and those much more sensitive to the responsibility of brands they purchase. With the former, it is necessary to be more persuasive and informative in communication efforts. Messages should explain and legitimize boycotts' issue with positive connotations in order to foster trust that a change can be achieved (Friedman 1996). According to Sen et al. (2001) and Klein et al. (2001), such strategies provide leverage over consumers' self-esteem. It is also necessary to include in the message elements that permit potential supporters to perceive a low cost in adhering to the boycott (i.e., proposing substitute

products or brands for the ones being boycotted). Moreover, it is important to influence the emotional appealing of the issue (Michel 1934) as well as the credibility of the promotional group (Sen et al. 2001). Indeed, behind boycotts lays the phenomenon of the social dilemma (Klein et al. 2002): the more people think that their abstention from buying will be part of only a little reality, the more they seem to give up the boycott (Klein et al. 2002). It is possible to assert that these mechanisms are strongly linked with the logic of the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1993) since people tend to support actions that have a higher probability for success due to the support of the majority.

The communication strategy with the target organization is particularly relevant for an instrumental boycott (Gesualdi 1999, Friedman 1999, Morelli and Raitano 2004) since negotiations are relevant. As a first step, it is important to inform the organization of the current phase of the boycott, providing information about signature lists and initiating personal meetings with representatives of the organization who manage the issue.

In the communication strategy with the mass media, boycotters have to consider not only the issue stage and the emotional part of the issue as discussed above, but also its interrelationship with additional issues. Furthermore, boycotters should consider synergies between traditional tactics: testimonials, slogans, and logos (Friedman 1999).

3. Switzerland 1994-2004: Strengths and weaknesses of the practice and strategies

At least two good reasons exist for studying the Swiss case: Switzerland is a country where no previous studies on this phenomenon have been performed, and Switzerland provides an interesting case for studying the historical evolution of consumer boycotts, as Friedman (1999) did for the United States².

The method used to select the boycotters promoting their actions in Switzerland follows the snowball sampling method, which starting from a list of actors selected from three Swiss NGO catalogs (AA.VV. 1995, AA.VV. 1996, ZEWO 1998) and from a web analysis (Google® Switzerland using the key word “boycott” in the three Swiss national languages). This method is commonly used by surveys that do not have a clear definition of the population (Fink 1995) and has been used by previous studies on consumer boycotts (Friedman 1985, 1999). In total 26 boycotters were identified to be active in the period between 1994 and 2004; 23 responded to the questionnaire. Although there is no certain way to assess that this number is representative of the entire Swiss population of consumer boycotters, it can be considered a substantial number since in 1985 Friedman collected approximately 90 consumer boycotters over a similar 10-year period in the United States—a wider and more populated territory. The questionnaire was designed

according to the dimensions presented in the previous chapter. Since many multiple questions were included, some of the following percentages are not countable.

3.1 Expressive surrogate consumer boycotts on political/social issues and conflict issues

The present study confirms Friedman's findings (1999). Like in the United States, the average length of consumer boycotts is one or two years, and they are carried out at an international scale (70 percent). In addition, boycotters' issues are mainly linked to human rights (19 percent), workplace environment (10 percent), and consumer rights (8.5 percent). Unlike Friedman's study, however, this survey indicates a prevalence of issues on conflicts (23 percent). The majority of boycotts regarding conflicts started in 2003 in conjunction with the Iraq war; indeed, such boycotts are addressed against American companies or oil companies.

Over time, a general tendency emerges from 1994 to 2004 that confirms the increase in consumer boycotts hypothesized by many authors (Gelb 1995, Drillech 1999, Friedman 1999). It is important to underline that this tendency depends mainly on consumer boycotts that started in 2003 on conflict issues. Prior to 2003, a mean of 1 or 2 boycotts actions occurred per year. Switzerland is a neutral country; therefore, it is not involved in international conflicts. The presence of many conflict issues implies that consumer boycotts do not represent a direct benefice for boycotters. Among 23 boycotts, 6 were characterized by a direct benefit. Among these, four are boycotts on consumer issues. These results indicate that boycotts in Switzerland are mainly expressive boycotts; however, this is not completely true since the 52 percent of boycotters specified that they use boycotts to negotiate and only 35 percent use them to express disillusioned expectations. Thus, the majority of boycotters initiate expressive boycotts with the objective of instrumental ones.

Such results do not contradict the typologies presented above since many surrogate or secondary boycotts (44 percent) occur. To understand these results in detail, it is necessary to look at boycotts' targets. Common targets of consumer boycotts are multinational organizations (60.8 percent) and governments (52 percent); among 12 respondents indicating governments as the target, 10 indicated a surrogate or secondary target organization. In some cases, respondents specified that they chose organizations that were linked with the government or that were sponsors of an election campaign; therefore, their boycotts were simultaneously expressive and surrogate/secondary.

In addition to these results, it is important to consider which other targets seem to be typically chosen in the Swiss territory. The data reveal a high number of banks as targets (22 percent of the cases), compared to Friedman's study where only 2 percent were banks. Another peculiarity is a discrete regional diffusion of consumer boycotts: 17 percent compared with 13 percent on

the national scale. This may be explained by the linguistic differences in Switzerland not present in the United States.

3.2. Strategies and planning opportunities still to be exploited

The survey reveals that boycotters choose their target product or brand in light of their target organization's visibility: 70 percent of targets have great notoriety, and 65 percent are leaders in their markets. Moreover, unlike Friedman's study (1999), only 10 percent of boycotters in Switzerland chose targets in light of recent economic weaknesses of the target.

Further, data show that boycotters use a network strategy without exploiting its potentialities. Indeed, 74 percent of the respondents looked for others' association support, 43 percent for political parties' support, and 3 percent for labor union support; 17 percent started collaborations with commercial partners of the target organization. Despite these numbers, each boycotter had a mean of only two collaborations, a low number that does not permit the use of network potentialities.

With regard to the boycotts' orientation, it is possible to assert that the tendency is to either develop a synergy with the two orientations or use the orientation toward media. Indeed, 52 percent of respondents oriented their action to the media, 21 percent oriented to both the market and the media, and 17 percent of them oriented the boycotts only to the market. It is interesting to note that 75 percent of boycotters orienting only to the market acted with regard to an emergent issue. As indicated in the previous chapter, this is not a good orientation for early issues.

The data also show that not all of these strategies were supported by efficient planning. Only 9 percent of boycotters discussed available resources before their actions, and no discussions took place on results expected from the boycott. Forty-three percent of boycotters were not able to judge the achievements of results. The majority who determined outcomes did so by considering the sensitization achieved of public opinion. Only some determined if the target changed its behavior. In light of previous results that show a high presence of expressive and surrogate/secondary boycotts—whose aim should be to change the target's behavior—it is possible to assert that boycotters do not evaluate what they should.

3.3. The need to improve communication strategies with regard to target organizations and media

Communicational strategies toward consumers are very efficient. Indeed, boycotters use various channels to reach consumers—from mass media to conferences, flyers, and boycotters' journals—and use message tactics that are more centered on positive connotations that influence individuals' self-esteem (48 percent of the cases) and on positive statements regarding the boycott's positive outcome (48 percent). Only 17 percent attempted to affect the sense of guilt of

the consumers. As explained in the previous chapter, such tactics are good, especially when issues are emergent. Since 48 percent of the issues studied were emergent, these communication strategies seem very efficient. It is important to underline that 80 percent of the boycotters promoted the abstention of buying a general list of products or brands without suggesting substitutes. This point reveals a weakness of the strategy, which should instead, as explained in the above chapter, suggest alternatives.

The communication strategies focused toward the target are underestimated; 39 percent of boycotters did not communicate with their targets, and 43 percent limited their communications to menaces. Only 17 percent sent signature lists, and only 13 percent negotiated with the target. Moreover, only 8 percent sent a press review and information on the evolution of the consumer boycott to the target. These results show that boycotters underestimate the potential of communication with the target, especially considering that they conduct surrogate boycotts that enhance negotiation opportunities.

The communication with mass media was discretely managed, especially considering that more than 50 percent of the boycotters were oriented to the media. Sixty-nine percent sent press releases, and 43 percent organized spectacular actions and press conferences. Each boycotter had a mean of 1 to 2 of these activities, which is not enough to engage in an effective communication strategy.

4. Conclusion

The research indicates that consumer boycotts in Switzerland share a common ground with the ones in the United States; however, it also reveals some peculiarities of the Swiss boycotts due on one hand to the current situation of international conflicts and on the other to the specific Swiss context. Compared to the United States, in Switzerland a greater number of conflict issues are relevant, and banks represent an important target. Moreover boycotts' actions are promoted only regionally given the linguistic differences in Switzerland.

In addition to these considerations on the nature of consumer boycotts, it is important to underline some managerial implications that might improve consumer boycotts in Switzerland. Indeed, it is interesting to note that consumer boycotters' strategies have yet to be developed. In addition to improving their planning, they should learn to manage target communication strategically, improve mass media communication, and develop network strategies. These recommendations are particularly relevant since a majority of the boycotts focus on issues in their emergent phases and therefore need to develop awareness among the public. Although consumer communication should be improved, it represents the strongest point of the boycotts' overall strategy.

In conclusion, in Switzerland boycotts have room to improve their strategies to reach best practices. So far, no empirical scientific works have been developed to assess the real relation between best practices and consumer boycotts' efficiency. Although beyond the scope of this paper, these elements can provide a basis for future research.

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¹ Other web sites: *The Resource Centre for Responsible Business Practice*, last visited November 2004, www.rc-sdbp.org; *Interfaith Centre on Corporate Responsibility*, last visited November 2004, www.iccr.org; *Corporate Social Responsibility News and Resources*, last visited November 2004, www.mallenbaker.net/csr.

² From the 1800s to the early 1900s, boycotts were discreetly used by Swiss unions, which instigated their members—also consumers—to boycott companies that were not respectful toward their employees (Deschenaux, H., 1956. Brochure 100 year labour union VHTL, www.vhtl.ch/100_ans_FCTA_1-32.pdf). Subsequently in the 1970s, there were some Swiss consumer boycotts due to the sudden increase of consumer goods' prices (ACSI, consumer Association in the Italian part of Switzerland, www.acsi.ch/index.cfm?scheda=479&start=1). Unlike other countries, in Switzerland there were not many boycotts started by minorities, but there have been many boycotts that aimed to carry out minorities' rights or CSR issues.